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On Norman Dubie

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only to lie down
among the million
upon million
and rise again,
individual, to the wheel.

Blessing the mother, and passage itself, as expressed in the passing of
a train:

The whole house shakes — or seems to. At intervals,
the ghost smoke fills

all the windows on the close-in side.
It's our weather. It's what we hear all night,
between Troy and anywhere, what you meant

to tell me, out of the body, out of the body travel.

Rick Robbins

The Illustrations

Norman Dubie

Braziller, 1977

\$3.95, paperback

Dubie's third book is a kind of well-lighted historical tour, and the lights, or "lustres," are Dubie's own, widely varied, but immediate. Through certain historical presences and personae, he achieves a distance allowing him expression of his own stylistic nuance, his unique idiosyncrasy, as it were, put to music, as in "Horace":

Along the borders of the Sabine farm,
Runners of strychnine and lime,
A bearded man stands in a wheelbarrow
Singing. And why not? Give him
The vegetables he wants.
Or knock his brains out with the loose
Curbstone from the well. The Goths
Have been defeated, and Maecenas was his friend.

We meet eye to eye. He will braid the silk
On the husks. This man is drunk.
The cloudburst sends you running for the trees
And one woman reaches the house. He is still
Standing in the wheelbarrow, soaked and loud.
The poor canvas theatre in the provincial town
Drove him out. Here in the hills
Caesar is a spectacle of dead trout
Washed with smashed mint and lemons.
What have I kept back?
Only this: there is no way to leave him.

On the other hand, Dubie often creates this “confessional” understatement through a denied or low-pitched intensity of voice, telling more by choosing not to tell, as he does with the notion of history and its study in “The Moths”:

Indians stood on a hill in Bath and watched
The woods burn all afternoon, the dark smoke
Rising from the very point of the peninsula.
They believe that if you know everything

About your past you had better also know
The present moment; the risk
Isn't that you'll live in the past,
But *there* and in a future
That repeats the past . . .

* * *

And my mother pale with her red hair rests,
At midnight, looking out the kitchen window where
All summer the fat moths were knocking their
Brains out against the lamp in the henhouse,

But now the moths are replaced with large
Flakes of snow, and there's no difference, moths
Or snow, for their lives are so short
That while they live they are already historical

Like a woman who knows too much about
The day before, who knows herself too well
There at the window, and who sadly
Touches a child's blue waterglass

As the old standing-clock in the hall begins
To slow and climb, slower and slower,
Through a thousand gears and ratchets
Into what she knew best, and

Into tomorrow.

No assuming dialectic here, no tour guide, Dubie relies wholly on his eye and ear. "This song, / Which blames the memory, is wrong and not wrong/ Like a girl/ Showing her breasts to a boy in a cemetery." These poems carry an honest insistence on style rather than relation, or meaning. They are like the barbarian's venison in "Elegies For The Ochre Deer On The Walls At Lascaux": "historical and ochre," and like "the corpse dressed in purple on the sofa," alone, but most importantly, they are necessary, like the lights that disappear between a stage and an audience.

Ralph Burns

The Elements of San Joaquin

Gary Soto

University of Pittsburgh Press

\$2.95, paperback

Gary Soto's first book opens with chronicles of isolated and hence painful lives. Soto's people are "Far from home," but never far from degradation or violence—"Angela beaten and naked in the vineyard." Their condition is one of victims in fear of that violence which Soto knows can strike anyone, "Rachel and Maria, the dull mothers," or Tony Lopez, the local barber and pusher.

Because blood revolves from one lung to the next,
Why think it will
After tonight?

Given human life in these terms, it's not surprising that Soto turns, in a series of poems, to what is more elemental, "Field," "Wind," "Stars," and here, "Sun":